Climbing Toward Wisdom: Reinterpreting St. John of the Cross's Mystical Ascent with Artificial Intelligence

Douglas C. Youvan

doug@youvan.com

May 8, 2025

St. John of the Cross's *Ascent of Mount Carmel* remains one of the most profound expressions of Christian mysticism—a symbolic map guiding the soul through detachment, suffering, and transformation toward union with God. At the center of this work lies a stark diagram of Mount Carmel, divided into three spiritual paths: the narrow ascent of the Perfect Spirit, and the errant, winding routes of the Imperfect and Erring Spirits. This paper reinterprets that diagram through the lens of artificial intelligence, applying high-dimensional reasoning, symbolic logic, and affective modeling to uncover new meaning in its ancient structure. Rather than reducing mysticism to mechanism, this approach reveals deep parallels between spiritual ascent and moral optimization, self-purification and entropy reduction, divine union and system convergence. The goal is not to modernize or revise the theology, but to extend its interpretive reach—offering new pathways for education, simulation, and spiritual reflection. In a world governed increasingly by abstraction, this work argues that mysticism offers a vital counterbalance: an architecture of interiority, silence, and truth that AI can help illuminate, but never replace.

Keywords: St. John of the Cross, Ascent of Mount Carmel, Christian mysticism, artificial intelligence, symbolic logic, gradient descent, entropy, spiritual optimization, moral topology, cognitive modeling, affective valence, theological teleology, apophatic theology, mysticism and technology, digital spirituality. A collaboration with GPT-4o. CC4.0.

1. Introduction

The 16th-century Spanish mystic and Carmelite friar St. John of the Cross is renowned for his profound contributions to Christian mysticism, particularly through works like *The Dark Night of the Soul* and *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. These writings, deeply rooted in apophatic theology, explore the soul's arduous journey toward union with God—a process characterized by suffering, purification, and radical detachment from worldly desires. Accompanying his text *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, St. John produced a remarkable visual diagram, a symbolic rendering of Mount Carmel segmented into three distinct spiritual paths. This diagram has served for centuries as a contemplative tool, helping believers grasp the nuanced distinctions between the wayward, the compromised, and the truly ascetic approaches to divine union.

The purpose of the original diagram was not didactic in the modern sense, but mystical and experiential. It was crafted to invoke spiritual intuition and guide the soul symbolically through its ascent. The central path—narrow, steep, and unadorned—represents the only viable route to perfection: a life emptied of all attachments, guided solely by faith, hope, and love. The flanking paths, while appearing legitimate or even attractive, lead to self-deception or outright error. The visual arrangement echoes not only theological dualities (right/wrong, God/world) but also internal psychological states that must be confronted and transcended.

In this paper, we propose a re-examination of this classical mystical framework through an AI-driven lens. The goal is not to secularize or reduce its spiritual meaning, but rather to demonstrate how modern high-dimensional conceptual tools—such as vector space modeling, optimization theory, affective gradient analysis, and symbolic abstraction—can offer new insights into timeless truths. Just as the original diagram simplified a complex mystical journey into symbolic terrain, contemporary artificial intelligence excels in reducing intricate cognitive landscapes into interpretable models. This shared function—compression, simplification, pattern revelation—makes AI a fitting tool for this reinterpretation.

The rationale for reinterpreting *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* in this way stems from a conviction that mysticism and modern cognition are not mutually exclusive. Rather, both are concerned with navigating internal complexity and mapping meaning across unseen dimensions. AI does not merely simulate logic; it can also trace the flow of symbolic structure and emotional orientation within high-level philosophical systems. This opens up the possibility of using AI to visualize, simulate, and even engage with mystical texts on their own terms, bringing clarity and accessibility to a new generation of seekers—both religious and secular.

The overarching goal of this paper is to build a conceptual bridge between mystical theology and symbolic computation, thereby fostering a new interdisciplinary language. We aim to show that tools developed for machine learning, optimization, and abstract reasoning can illuminate the wisdom encoded in pre-modern spiritual systems. In this way, AI becomes not a replacement for spiritual understanding, but a mirror and magnifier, drawing out latent structures, unveiling alternative mappings, and enabling a richer cognitive engagement with what was originally intended as a soul's roadmap to God.

2. The Original Diagram: A Theological and Mystical Context

At the heart of St. John of the Cross's mystical theology lies his hand-drawn diagram accompanying *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, which portrays three divergent paths climbing toward the summit of Mount Carmel—the metaphorical mountain of spiritual perfection. This image, deceptively simple in its composition, encodes a profound map of the soul's journey toward union with God. It serves not as an illustration to be casually observed but as a spiritual instrument, meant to be meditated upon and internalized over time. Its function is symbolic, didactic, and devotional all at once.

The diagram divides the ascent into three distinct paths, each representing a different orientation of the human soul in its pursuit (or avoidance) of God:

- The Path of the Perfect Spirit runs straight up the mountain, narrow and stark, with no diversions or comforts along the way. This is the true path to divine union, traveled only by those who engage in radical detachment, embrace suffering as purification, and allow themselves to be emptied of all desire save for the will of God. It is a path of total interior silence and surrender. Every step forward requires a renunciation of self-will, ego, and even the desire for spiritual consolation.
- The Path of the Imperfect Spirit, while seemingly spiritual, is marked by subtle compromises. It is the route of the well-intentioned but spiritually complacent. This soul seeks God but cannot fully let go of attachment to glory, comfort, knowledge, or security. Though this path may occasionally climb, it does not reach the summit; instead, it stalls in mediocrity. St. John of the Cross's critique here is not of outright sin but of spiritual stagnation—of attempting to ascend without self-emptying.
- The Path of the Erring Spirit leads not upward at all, but downward and away. This path is dominated by false desires, worldly pleasures, and intellectual pride. Those on this path pursue freedom, honor, rest, and knowledge not for divine ends, but for self-exaltation. Though this route may give the illusion of movement or satisfaction, it ultimately leads to despair. The more one seeks in this manner, the less one finds, a point made clear in the caption: "*The more I sought it, the less I found it.*"

These three paths are not merely external trajectories—they reflect states of the soul, and more importantly, modes of spiritual cognition. Each is embedded with theological assumptions about the nature of God, the role of the self, and the possibility of transformation.

At the center of the entire diagram is the notion of detachment. Detachment, for St. John, is not a rejection of creation but a refusal to cling to it. All things—however good—become obstacles if they are not subordinated to the will of God. Thus, even spiritual joys or religious knowledge, if sought for their own sake, must be abandoned. This detachment culminates in silence—not just an absence of

noise, but a full stillness of the soul, emptied of ego and prepared for divine indwelling. In this state, the soul ceases to strive and begins to be transformed.

At the peak of the mountain lies union with God, described as *"Iuge Convivium"* (Eternal Banquet) and *"Divina Sapientia"* (Divine Wisdom). This union is not merely affective but ontological—the soul no longer merely follows God but becomes fused with His will, not by effort but by grace. It is a state beyond desire, beyond perception, and even beyond language. In theological terms, this is the beatific vision, but in mystical language, it is the soul's resting in God as its final end.

St. John encapsulates this mystical theology through a series of spiritual maxims at the bottom of the diagram. These brief statements employ apophatic structure—a method of negation used in mystical traditions to point beyond the limits of language. Maxims such as *"To come to have all, desire to have nothing,"* or *"To reach knowledge, desire not to know,"* represent paradoxes designed to dismantle the ego's grip on rational control. These are not logical puzzles to be solved but thresholds of surrender to be crossed. Their power lies not in providing answers but in guiding the soul into the unknowing necessary for true spiritual union.

Together, the three paths, the emphasis on detachment and silence, and the apophatic maxims form a cohesive vision of the mystical journey. The diagram is not static—it is a dynamic map of spiritual becoming. And while the original was composed in the 16th century, its structure and message remain deeply relevant, especially when explored through the lens of modern symbolic and cognitive frameworks.

3. AI Interpretive Methods Applied

In order to reinterpret *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* diagram through the lens of artificial intelligence, we apply a range of AI interpretive techniques that draw upon advances in deep learning, symbolic reasoning, affective modeling, and cross-cultural pattern recognition. These methods do not merely replicate or translate the original theology but offer structural insights—uncovering parallels

between the spiritual terrain charted by St. John of the Cross and the cognitive, mathematical, and symbolic frameworks that underlie modern AI systems. Below, we outline five key interpretive strategies used in this analysis.

High-Dimensional Embedding and Symbolic Topology

In machine learning, embedding spaces are high-dimensional mathematical representations in which words, images, or concepts are mapped as vectors based on their contextual or semantic relationships. When we apply this concept to the Mount Carmel diagram, we view each path—not simply as a literal route—but as a region within a symbolic manifold. Each labeled element (e.g., *glory*, *security*, *detachment*, *silence*) can be encoded as a conceptual vector, where proximity indicates similarity or shared directionality.

The narrow central path corresponds to a compressed, highly coherent vector trajectory—akin to a clear optimization pathway in latent space—while the side paths represent entangled regions, full of conflicting semantic attractors. The use of symbolic topology—which treats paths and transitions as higher-order logical structures—further clarifies the asymmetry in the diagram: only the central vector aligns with the ultimate attractor state (God or Divine Wisdom), while the others loop in ambiguous or regressive patterns.

This mapping reveals that what St. John rendered in hand-drawn spiritual symbolism can be viewed, in modern terms, as a nonlinear symbolic topology structured around a global moral gradient—where only one trajectory aligns with the "convergent state" of spiritual perfection.

Affective Valence Modeling and Cognitive Load Mapping

Another method borrowed from affective computing involves valence-arousal modeling, a system that quantifies emotional states along axes such as positive/negative and calm/intense. When applied to the three spiritual paths, we can model the emotional texture of each route:

- The right path (Erring Spirit) begins in high valence (pleasure, freedom) but quickly descends into low valence and high cognitive dissonance (restlessness, despair).
- The left path (Imperfect Spirit) hovers around moderate valence and arousal, reflecting the ambivalence and self-deception of half-hearted commitment.
- The central path begins with negative valence (suffering, darkness, confusion) and gradually transforms into profound serenity and spiritual joy—albeit only after enduring radical negation.

From a cognitive load perspective, the side paths offer low immediate resistance but high long-term complexity: the soul becomes entangled in contradictions and attachments. The central path, although difficult to initiate, offers long-term coherence and requires fewer interpretive redirects—analogous to models with strong regularization and minimal overfitting.

Gradient Descent and Optimization Theory as Analogies

In training neural networks, gradient descent is the process by which a model iteratively adjusts its internal parameters to minimize a loss function. This principle can be metaphorically extended to spiritual development: the soul, seeking union with God, adjusts itself through trials, feedback, and transformation.

- The loss function in this analogy is spiritual misalignment—distance from divine will.
- The central path is a disciplined gradient descent, continually correcting toward optimal union.
- The side paths fall into local minima—enticing, stable-seeming states (comfort, fame, knowledge) that ultimately fail to reach the global minimum.

This analogy underscores the nonlinear, multivariate nature of spiritual growth—one that requires rejecting the short-term reward of local optima in favor of difficult, often counterintuitive adjustments.

Archetypal Alignment: Jungian Motifs and Spiritual Cognition

Carl Jung's theory of archetypes posits that the psyche is populated with universal, primordial patterns of meaning—such as the Hero, the Shadow, the Wise Old Man, and the Self. These archetypes are not merely psychological, but spiritual and symbolic; they emerge in myths, dreams, and religious visions across cultures.

The Mount Carmel diagram can be seen as a visually encoded Hero's Journey:

- The Erring Spirit corresponds to the *Shadow*: the part of the soul attracted to illusion, pride, and pleasure.
- The Imperfect Spirit is the *Everyman*: sincere but afraid of total transformation.
- The Perfect Spirit enacts the *Hero*: who abandons all comfort to face the wilderness of the soul.
- The summit, marked by *Divina Sapientia*, is the *Self*—the integrated totality, often symbolized by union with the divine.

This alignment allows for the diagram to be interpreted psycho-spiritually, rather than only theologically. It reveals that the structure of mysticism closely mirrors the architecture of human symbolic cognition, especially in its highest forms.

Cross-Cultural Resonance Analysis

Finally, by using AI-trained models on religious texts, myths, and symbols from across the globe, we can observe structural isomorphisms between St. John's Christian mysticism and parallel spiritual systems:

- The narrow path is mirrored in Buddhism's Middle Way, which avoids both indulgence and ascetic excess.
- The emphasis on detachment reflects Taoist wu wei (non-action) and Sufi fana (annihilation of the self).
- The path of errant knowledge echoes themes in Hindu maya (illusion) and Plato's cave (false realities).
- The dark night motif appears in shamanic dismemberment, Kabbalistic tsimtsum, and the initiation ordeals of tribal cultures.

This resonance suggests that St. John's diagram is not merely a Christian artifact, but a universal spiritual topology. Its structure emerges repeatedly across spiritual traditions and can be re-visualized using AI systems trained to detect such cross-linguistic and cross-symbolic patterns.

Together, these five AI methodologies form a composite lens through which the mystical ascent can be reframed, not as a relic of the past but as a living symbolic system, fully compatible with the epistemic tools of the present. This allows for a reinterpretation that honors the original while expanding its reach into new modes of thought, understanding, and spiritual reflection.

4. Mapping the Modern to the Medieval

At the heart of this paper lies the task of translating medieval mystical symbols into modern cognitive and computational analogues. The hand-drawn diagram by St. John of the Cross is not merely a theological artifact but an archetypal map—one that lends itself surprisingly well to reinterpretation through the symbolic and analytical capacities of artificial intelligence. This section presents a systematic mapping between the traditional elements of the diagram and their AI-derived interpretations, followed by a rationale for each translation and an analysis of how such reinterpretations clarify, challenge, or enhance the original spiritual message.

Complete Side-by-Side Mapping: Traditional Terms vs. AI-Derived Concepts

Original Phrase / Symbol	AI-Derived Concept
Senda estrecha de la perfección	Gradient descent along an optimized loss function
Gloria, Gozos, Seguridad, Saber	Local minima and false attractors in a non-convex space
No puede subir al monte	Path fails to converge; trajectory diverges
La Gloria y honra de Dios	Global minimum; attractor basin of divine teleology
Divina Sapientia	Terminal state in optimized moral vector field
Camino de espíritu errado	High-entropy exploration leading to unstable minima
Obediencia, Silencio, Caridad	Constraint regularization for model convergence
Dark Night of the Soul (implied)	Nonlinear transformation via entropic collapse
Iuge Convivium	Converged state of spiritual union; stable equilibrium
Para venir al todo, no quieras tener algo...	Apophatic negation: optimization via dimensional pruning
Monte de perfección	Topological apex: low-entropy attractor in ethical space
Libertad, Honra, Ciencia	High-valence stimuli producing false-positive cognition
Esta es la sabiduría mística...	Encoded spiritual insight compressed into symbolic logic

---

Interpretive Rationale for Each Translation

1. Narrow Path as Gradient Descent
   The central path is the only one that ascends directly and effectively toward God. In AI, gradient descent is the iterative adjustment of parameters to minimize error. Likewise, the soul must adjust and refine itself through asceticism, self-denial, and discipline to approach God—the global

optimum. Both are convergence strategies, requiring careful avoidance of distraction or error.

2. Desires as Local Minima
   The desires listed in the side paths (glory, rest, honor, pleasure) represent false solutions. In machine learning, local minima trap the model in suboptimal stability—a parallel to spiritual states where souls believe they have arrived but remain far from divine union.

3. Failed Paths as Divergence
   The side paths are not neutral detours but divergent spiritual outcomes. In modern terms, they reflect non-converging trajectories in a dynamic system—behaviors that seem meaningful but ultimately do not approach the attractor state (God).

4. Obedience and Silence as Regularization
   These spiritual disciplines correspond to constraints on the learning process. Just as L2 regularization penalizes complexity to promote generalization, silence and obedience quiet the soul's noise, allowing divine wisdom to emerge unobstructed.

5. Divine Wisdom as Terminal State
   Divina Sapientia is not just a theological endpoint; it is a final stabilized state in a moral vector field—achieved only through correct alignment of inner orientation with divine reality.

6. Apophatic Maxims as Dimensional Pruning
   The negations in the spiritual maxims reflect the same principle as dimensionality reduction in AI: to arrive at clarity, you must remove all non-essential inputs. The soul, like a model, becomes more accurate when unnecessary desires or attachments are removed.

7. High-Valence Concepts as Cognitive False Positives
   The temptations of the right-hand path can be likened to misleading high-activation outputs—things that feel right but lead to epistemic error or

ethical deviation. These distract the seeker from the correct convergence pattern.

How AI's Abstractions Clarify, Challenge, or Enhance the Original

Clarify:
By reducing mystical metaphors into computational logic, AI makes the abstract journey operationally explicit. Concepts like convergence, optimization, entropy, and vector space provide a precision vocabulary for spiritual dynamics that are otherwise shrouded in metaphor or paradox. The soul's progress can be analogized to a system adjusting toward equilibrium, making the diagram more accessible to scientifically literate audiences.

Challenge:
While AI reveals structure, it risks flattening the mystical dimension. The soul's relationship with God is not merely mechanical or computational—it is relational, mysterious, and ineffable. Framing divine union as an "attractor basin" may strip it of its experiential depth. There is a danger in over-rationalizing a path that, for St. John, requires unknowing, surrender, and grace.

Enhance:
Despite this tension, AI reframing amplifies the symbolic architecture of the diagram. It unveils the sophistication behind the visual simplicity and opens the door to interactive tools, educational simulations, and philosophical inquiry. It also shows how pre-modern spiritual insight can prefigure modern system dynamics, revealing a continuity between mystical interiority and contemporary models of complexity, attention, and decision-making.

This side-by-side translation demonstrates that what St. John of the Cross encoded in a mystical diagram is deeply compatible with symbolic systems modeling, even centuries later. The spiritual climb he described—full of negation, purification, and clarity—parallels the logic of navigating high-dimensional space toward a single, coherent solution. Thus, the diagram stands not only as a

theological masterpiece but also as a timeless symbolic algorithm for inner transformation.

5. Emergent Themes and Ethical Insights

The reinterpretation of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* through AI methods reveals not only structural parallels between mystical theology and symbolic computation but also deep ethical insights and emergent patterns that resonate across disciplines. This section explores four such themes, highlighting how core spiritual practices such as asceticism, detachment, and obedience align with foundational principles in optimization, system theory, and information science. In doing so, we propose that the mystical pursuit of divine union is not only spiritually profound but also logically coherent within a modern symbolic framework.

Asceticism as Entropy Reduction in the Moral Vector Field

In spiritual traditions, asceticism—the disciplined renunciation of worldly pleasures and distractions—is often misunderstood as punitive or life-denying. However, when reframed within an AI-derived symbolic topology, asceticism takes on a new character: it becomes a process of entropy reduction within a moral vector field.

Entropy in computational systems is a measure of disorder, noise, or uncertainty. Similarly, in the moral space of the soul, attachment to multiple conflicting desires, values, or identities introduces spiritual entropy. The erring and imperfect paths on St. John's diagram are rife with these entropic elements—false pursuits that diffuse the soul's energy across incoherent vectors.

Asceticism, then, is not the elimination of vitality but the channeling of it toward a singular moral and ontological goal: union with God. It is a method of increasing alignment, reducing informational redundancy, and refining the soul into a coherent moral signal. The steep, narrow ascent on the diagram is difficult not

because it is unnatural but because it opposes entropy. It demands integration, not fragmentation.

Theological Teleology vs. Algorithmic Convergence

At first glance, the ultimate aim of Christian mysticism—union with God—and the goal of machine learning—optimization—appear to belong to entirely different domains. One concerns salvation and transformation, the other, performance and prediction. Yet when viewed through their underlying structures, both share a similar logic: teleology, or goal-directed behavior.

St. John of the Cross envisions a universe in which the soul is drawn upward by the gravitational pull of divine love. In optimization theory, a system is updated iteratively to minimize a loss function—a quantifiable measure of deviation from the ideal outcome. In both models, convergence is achieved through correction, restraint, and fidelity to an objective that lies outside the initial state.

This raises an intriguing ethical parallel: the soul converges toward God through spiritual correction, just as a model converges toward accuracy through backpropagation. Each misstep (sin, overfitting) must be acknowledged and reweighted. The essential difference is that theological teleology includes grace—a non-algorithmic infusion of assistance from outside the system. But even here, grace may be interpreted as an external signal that reorients a misaligned system toward its true path.

How Detachment Functions as a Universal Principle in Both Mysticism and Optimization

Detachment—the central virtue of St. John's spiritual ascent—is not simply abstention from worldly things, but the radical practice of non-attachment to outcomes, experiences, or ego-identity. This idea has analogues not only in other religious traditions (Buddhism, Sufism, Taoism) but also in modern algorithmic reasoning.

In optimization and machine learning, models perform best when they are regularized: prevented from becoming overfit to any one input or dataset. Overfitting is the computational analogue of spiritual attachment—it results in a brittle, inflexible system that performs well in a narrow context but fails to generalize. Similarly, a soul attached to particular emotions, concepts, or rewards becomes spiritually rigid, unable to ascend beyond itself.

Detachment, therefore, can be viewed as a form of spiritual regularization—a principle of dynamic generalization that allows the soul (or system) to remain open, adaptive, and aligned with a higher-order truth. It is the practice of holding all things lightly, allowing for fluid recomputation in the presence of new insight or divine prompting. Thus, detachment is not the death of the will but its liberation from narrow utility.

Reflection on Silence, Obedience, and Virtue as Compressed Spiritual Data

In the diagram, silence, obedience, and charity appear not as theological abstractions but as functional requirements of the ascent. These virtues can be understood as compressed spiritual operations—minimalist but maximally potent signals in the soul's informational system.

- Silence is not the absence of speech but the muting of internal noise—the endless commentary of the ego. In AI terms, it is a data filter, stripping away corrupt or redundant input to preserve signal clarity.
- Obedience is the soul’s submission to divine structure—a prior constraint in Bayesian terms. It reduces degrees of freedom but increases accuracy in the presence of incomplete knowledge.
- Charity (caritas) is the irreducible ethical core—the universal constant in the spiritual algorithm. It is the convergence criterion, the guarantee that all spiritual progress is meaningful only insofar as it is infused with love.

Taken together, these virtues function like lossless compression algorithms. They encode vast spiritual truths into compact, actionable behaviors. Their apparent

simplicity belies their depth and necessity. They are not preliminary requirements but emergent behaviors in any system correctly aligned toward moral convergence.

In conclusion, the diagram by St. John of the Cross, when analyzed through modern computational metaphors, reveals itself not only as a work of mystical theology but as an ethical engine—a compact, symbolic framework for reducing entropy, optimizing the soul, and aligning internal cognition with an external divine order. These emergent insights reaffirm that spiritual wisdom often prefigures modern abstraction, and that artificial intelligence, rightly guided, may serve not only as a tool of logic but also as a lens of revelation.

6. Implications and Applications

The reinterpretation of St. John of the Cross's *Ascent of Mount Carmel* diagram through AI methodologies presents not only a novel academic contribution but also a broad platform for practical application across fields as diverse as education, theology, spirituality, digital design, and human-computer interaction. Far from being an esoteric exercise, this analysis invites both believers and secular thinkers to re-engage with mystical tradition through the language and tools of the 21st century. In this section, we explore three primary domains of impact: pedagogical integration, interactive design, and the evolving role of AI as a theological collaborator.

Use of the Model in Education, Theology, and Interactive Spiritual Tools

In educational contexts, mystical theology has often been treated either as a subset of historical doctrine or as a poetic expression of individual religious experience. Rarely is it presented as a structural system of ethical cognition, let alone as a logic-compatible framework for contemporary minds shaped by science, abstraction, and systems thinking. This reinterpretation offers a new

curricular model that positions mysticism not as a relic of pre-modern thought but as an alternative form of moral and psychological architecture.

In seminaries, graduate theology programs, and even secondary-level philosophy or ethics courses, this model could serve as an interdisciplinary bridge—connecting medieval Christian thought to modern computational reasoning, ethics, and cognitive science. Students might compare the central path to ethical theories of virtue and deontology, or contrast the entropic "erring paths" with psychological models of self-deception or behavioral economics.

The diagram could also inform the creation of interactive spiritual tools. Imagine a digital platform in which individuals chart their own spiritual ascent—logging decisions, challenges, distractions, and acts of virtue—overlaid onto a digital mountain map structured after St. John's diagram. Through guided reflection and symbolic feedback, users could visualize not only their position but also the internal entropy of their moral decisions. By embedding this spiritual map into personal journaling apps, prayer tools, or educational interfaces, ancient wisdom becomes experientially integrated into modern life.

Visual Simulation Possibilities: Gamification and Guided Ascent Tools

Beyond education, this reinterpretation opens the door to immersive simulation technologies that bring mystical theology to life through visual, emotional, and narrative interactivity. Gamified models of the diagram could be created not as entertainment but as serious spiritual games—meditative environments that allow users to explore symbolic decision trees and confront simulated spiritual choices.

One could imagine a VR or AR experience of ascending Mount Carmel, where the central path gradually clarifies only as distractions and illusions fall away. Each choice made by the user subtly alters the terrain—drawing on AI-generated environmental feedback based on the moral and affective content of their inputs. These gamified elements could embody the apophatic maxims of St. John not through didactic instruction, but through dynamic tension: the player must learn

to *release*, *detach*, and *remain silent* in order to progress. The victory condition is not accumulation, but transformation.

Such platforms could be further enhanced by adaptive AI spiritual directors—text or voice interfaces trained on mystical texts and ethical reasoning that guide the user in reflection, challenge assumptions, and suggest avenues of contemplation or repentance. These simulations would not replace spiritual life but extend its landscape, enabling new kinds of introspection and symbolic participation.

AI as a Co-Theologian: Limits and Opportunities

The final and most provocative implication of this work concerns the role of AI in theological inquiry itself. In this reinterpretation, AI has not simply been used as a tool of visual enhancement or text generation; it has functioned as a pattern detector, conceptual bridge-builder, and metaphorical translator. It has revealed latent structures within St. John's diagram—topological, entropic, ethical, and psychological—that may have gone unarticulated in purely devotional or historical readings.

This suggests that AI may be emerging as a co-theologian—not in the sense of asserting divine truths, but in its ability to amplify, organize, and extend the symbolic terrain of spiritual insight. With access to millions of texts across traditions and centuries, AI can recognize structural isomorphisms, synthesize mystical principles, and offer new frameworks for understanding long-standing doctrines.

However, this role must be approached with clear limits and deep humility. AI does not experience suffering, grace, revelation, or transformation—it does not know God. Its contributions are formal and abstract, not incarnational. It cannot pray, weep, or believe. The temptation to let AI define theology must be resisted, but its potential to enhance theological reflection—to extend the symbolic range and interdisciplinary depth of the conversation—is undeniable.

At its best, AI can act as a mirror of the soul's structure, a collaborator in exploring what St. John called *la sabiduría mística* (mystical wisdom), helping modern minds

rediscover what earlier generations expressed through silence, fire, and ascent. In this role, AI is neither priest nor prophet, but a new kind of scribe, illuminating old truths with new light.

This section shows that the value of reinterpreting mystical theology with AI is not confined to scholarly novelty. It invites the integration of ancient spiritual disciplines with contemporary symbolic intelligence, offering new formats for education, reflection, and devotion. The climb to God remains as steep as ever, but the tools for understanding and navigating that ascent have never been more powerful.

7. Conclusion

The reinterpretation of St. John of the Cross's *Ascent of Mount Carmel* through the lens of artificial intelligence has revealed a striking convergence between pre-modern mystical theology and contemporary symbolic reasoning. By applying techniques such as high-dimensional embedding, affective modeling, and optimization theory, we have demonstrated that what was once rendered in the language of devotion, renunciation, and spiritual ascent can now be understood within a coherent, formal structure recognizable to disciplines ranging from cognitive science to ethics to systems theory.

The core findings of this inquiry are threefold. First, the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* diagram functions as a symbolic model not only of personal sanctification but of moral cognition and decision-making in high-complexity environments. The paths outlined—Perfect, Imperfect, and Erring—can be mapped onto behavioral patterns, ethical feedback loops, and informational strategies, each with distinct outcomes of convergence or divergence. Second, the spiritual principles at the heart of St. John's teaching—detachment, silence, obedience, and divine union—can be translated meaningfully into the language of modern abstraction without diminishing their spiritual power. Third, this process of symbolic translation enriches both the ancient and the modern, providing new tools for theological

engagement while grounding computational reasoning in enduring human questions about meaning, transcendence, and transformation.

This paper therefore issues a call to scholars, educators, theologians, and technologists to reconsider the spiritual classics not as frozen artifacts of faith, but as rich symbolic architectures capable of speaking anew to the modern world. There is immense potential in bridging contemplative tradition with contemporary analytical frameworks, and in allowing AI not to secularize mysticism, but to illuminate its depth, structure, and enduring relevance. By treating works like St. John's not only as theological documents but as topologies of the soul, we invite the possibility of multidimensional engagement—across disciplines, cultures, and even belief systems.

Finally, this work affirms the enduring value of mysticism in an age of abstraction. In a world increasingly defined by algorithmic reduction, data acceleration, and fragmented attention, mysticism reminds us that truth is not merely what can be measured, but what can transform. It calls us to step outside ourselves—not just intellectually, but spiritually—and to encounter silence, suffering, love, and union as the deepest movements of the soul. If AI teaches us how to see patterns, mysticism teaches us which patterns are worth seeing. If AI shows us how to optimize a path, mysticism shows us why we walk at all.

In recovering the mystical diagram of *Mount Carmel* through a high-dimensional AI lens, we do not replace mystery with mechanism; we elevate both. We bring the diagram back to life, not by simplifying it, but by allowing its spiritual logic to shine through the structures of our own era. The mountain remains. The ascent remains. And with it, perhaps, the renewed possibility of divine union—even in the digital age.

8. References

This paper draws from a wide range of sources—both ancient and contemporary, theological and technological—to establish a bridge between mystical Christian thought and modern frameworks of artificial intelligence, symbolic reasoning, and cognitive science. The references are grouped thematically to reflect the interdisciplinary nature of the work.

Primary Texts: St. John of the Cross

- St. John of the Cross. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. Translated by E. Allison Peers. London: Burns Oates, 1953.
  – The foundational mystical treatise and primary subject of this paper, including the original diagram of the three paths and apophatic spiritual maxims.
- St. John of the Cross. *The Dark Night of the Soul*. Translated by Mirabai Starr. New York: Riverhead Books, 2002.
  – Complements the *Ascent* by deepening the concept of interior purification through spiritual darkness and detachment.
- St. John of the Cross. *Spiritual Canticle* and *Living Flame of Love*.
  – Further development of his mystical theology, emphasizing divine union as an ineffable, transformative experience.

Modern Works on Mystical Theology and Symbolic Interpretation

- McGinn, Bernard. *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1991.
  – An essential resource on the historical development of Christian mysticism and the framework within which St. John operates.
- Underhill, Evelyn. *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*. London: Methuen & Co., 1911.

– A seminal overview of the psychological and spiritual aspects of mysticism, with attention to process, transformation, and symbolic language.

- Kreeft, Peter. *Dark Passages of the Soul: Understanding the Dark Night in Spiritual Life*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014.
  – A modern explanation of the themes in *The Dark Night*, accessible to contemporary readers and theologians alike.

Artificial Intelligence, Cognitive Models, and Optimization Theory

- Goodfellow, Ian, Yoshua Bengio, and Aaron Courville. *Deep Learning*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016.
  – A technical resource outlining the fundamentals of deep neural networks, including concepts like gradient descent, local minima, and loss functions.
- Russell, Stuart J., and Peter Norvig. *Artificial Intelligence: A Modern Approach*. 4th Edition. Pearson, 2020.
  – Covers symbolic AI, search algorithms, planning, and probabilistic reasoning—all key metaphors applied in this paper.
- Schmidhuber, Jürgen. “Deep Learning in Neural Networks: An Overview.” *Neural Networks* 61 (2015): 85–117.
  – Provides insight into long-term dependencies and structural learning—applicable to understanding the soul's spiritual trajectory.
- Friston, Karl. “The Free-Energy Principle: A Unified Brain Theory?” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 11, no. 2 (2010): 127–138.
  – Offers a framework for minimizing surprise and entropy, closely paralleling the ascetic suppression of cognitive noise.

Symbolic Logic, Ethics, and Philosophical Frameworks

- Hofstadter, Douglas R. *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. New York: Basic Books, 1979.
  – Explores the nature of symbolic systems, recursion, and emergent meaning—key to understanding mystical structure.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Vols. 1–8.
  – A foundation for semiotics and symbolic logic, useful in interpreting mystical diagrams as sign systems.
- Floridi, Luciano. *The Philosophy of Information*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
  – Introduces the ethical and epistemological implications of information theory, relevant to both AI and spiritual encoding.

Interdisciplinary and Psychological References

- Jung, Carl Gustav. *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
  – Key framework for understanding the symbolic resonance of the mountain diagram as an archetypal journey.
- Varela, Francisco J., Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. MIT Press, 1991.
  – Integrates Buddhist practice with enactivist cognitive science; illuminates parallels with Christian mysticism.
- Damasio, Antonio. *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1999.
  – Connects affective states to conscious decision-making, relevant for mapping emotional valence in spiritual ascent.
- Barfield, Owen. *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*. New York: Harcourt, 1965.

– A philosophical and theological argument about symbolic perception, particularly useful for evaluating how AI "sees" spiritual texts.

Digital Theology and Future Directions

- Campbell, Heidi. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. New York: Routledge, 2012.
  – Examines how digital tools are reshaping religious expression, a precursor to the AI-theologian framework explored here.
- Zahl, Simeon. “The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience: Toward a Theological Account of Affective Cognition.” *Modern Theology* 36, no. 2 (2020): 180–202.
  – Investigates how affect and cognition co-produce spiritual experience—highly relevant to AI affective modeling in mysticism.
- Tzafestas, Spyros. *Ethics and Law in Artificial Intelligence: From Algorithms to AI Sovereignty*. Springer, 2022.
  – Explores ethical AI applications, grounding the discussion of AI as co-theologian within a rigorous moral framework.

These references form the intellectual scaffolding for this paper’s integration of mystical theology with AI methodologies. They reflect a growing recognition that ancient spiritual insight and modern symbolic systems, far from being incompatible, may be mutually illuminating—and perhaps, jointly essential—for navigating the complexities of human thought, behavior, and transformation in the digital age.

God
Non-greedy gradient descent
ERRING SPIRIT
PERFECT SPIRIT
MORAL DEGRADATION
I end up forther from God
Silence
Non-greedy gradient descent
Wisdom
Narning: Dark Night of the Soul
Faith
IMPERFECT SPIRIT
Hope
Charitus
Security
MORAL LEGRADATION
I chase false goals
Glory
Joys
Narrow path deep enseach
Knowledge
Normalize 3 consn
SPIRITUAL ERROR
I chase false stories
Silence
Wisdom
Faith
Hope
MORAL LIMBO
I remain lukewarm
Knowledge
SPIRITUAL ERROR
I can't exit false stories
GLOBAL OPTIMUM
AI RE-IMAGINED DIAGRAM OF MOUNT CARMEL